

WHAT IS CLAIMED IS:

Sub A⁸

1. A method of assisting users in evaluating items of an electronic catalog of items, the catalog accessible to users of an online store that provides services for allowing users to purchase items from the catalog, the method comprising the computer-implemented steps of:

storing contact information for at least some of the users of the store within a computer memory;

identifying an item to be displayed to a first user;

identifying a second user that has purchased the item;

retrieving the contact information for the second user from the computer memory; and

electronically notifying the first user of the contact information of the second user to allow the first user to communicate with the second user about the item.

15 2. The method of Claim 1, wherein identifying the second user comprises:

identifying a user community of which the first user is a member; and

determining whether another member of the community has purchased the item.

3. The method of Claim 1, wherein identifying an item to display to the first user comprises:

identifying a community of which the first user is a member; and

identifying an item that is popular within the community.

4. The method of Claim 3, wherein identifying an item that is popular within the community comprises identifying at least one item which, based on purchases made within the community relative to purchases made within a general user population, distinguishes the community from the general user population.

Sub A⁹

20 5. The method of Claim 1, wherein electronically notifying comprises incorporating the contact information into a product detail page requested by the first user.

6. The method of Claim 1, wherein electronically notifying comprises sending to the first user an email message which contains the contact information and a description of the product.

5 7. The method of Claim 1, further comprising generating a data structure which maps items to users that purchased the items.

8. The method of Claim 1, wherein the contact information includes an email alias for permitting anonymous communications.

10 9. The method of Claim 1, further comprising presenting to users of the store at least one option screen which permits users to authorize release of contact information to other users on at least one of (a) a user-by-user basis, and (b) a community-by-community basis.

15 10. The method of Claim 1, wherein the community is an implicit membership community.

15 11. The method of Claim 10, wherein the implicit membership community is based on email addresses of users.

Sub A 12. The method of Claim 1, wherein electronically notifying the first user of the contact information comprises presenting the first user an option to chat online with the second user.

20 13. A system for assisting users of an online store in evaluating items of an electronic catalog of items, the system comprising:

a data structure which maps items from the catalog to users that have purchased such items; and

25 14. A process which responds to an online request by a first user to view a description of an item from the catalog by at least (a) accessing the data structure to identify a second user that has purchased the item, and (b) displaying contact information of the second user to the first user in conjunction with the description.

30 15. The system of Claim 13, wherein the data structure maps items to users that purchased the items for each of a plurality of communities, and the process uses the data structure to locate a fellow community member that purchased the item.

15. The system of Claim 13, wherein the data structure contains the contact information of users.

16. The system of Claim 13, wherein the contact information includes email aliases for at least some of the users.

17. The system of Claim 13, wherein the contact information includes an option for the first user to chat online with the second user.

Sub A¹¹ 18. A method of assisting a first user in evaluating a merchant, comprising:
identifying a community of which the first is a member;
identifying a second user that is a member of the community and that
has engaged in business with the merchant; and
electronically notifying the first user of the contact information of the
second user to allow the first user to communicate with the second user about
the merchant.

19. The method of Claim 18, wherein the community is an implicit membership community.

20. The method of Claim 18, wherein the implicit membership community is based on email addresses of users.

21. The method of Claim 18, wherein electronically notifying comprises accessing a data structure which maps merchants to users that have engaged in business with such merchants for each of a plurality of communities.

22. The method of Claim 18, wherein the contact information includes an email alias for permitting anonymous communications.

23. The method of Claim 18, wherein the merchant is a seller on an online auction Web site, and the first user is electronically notified of the second user in response to an action performed by the first user while browsing the Web site.

24. The method of Claim 18, wherein electronically notifying the first user comprises presenting the first user an option to chat online with the second user.

Add A¹²
Add B¹³